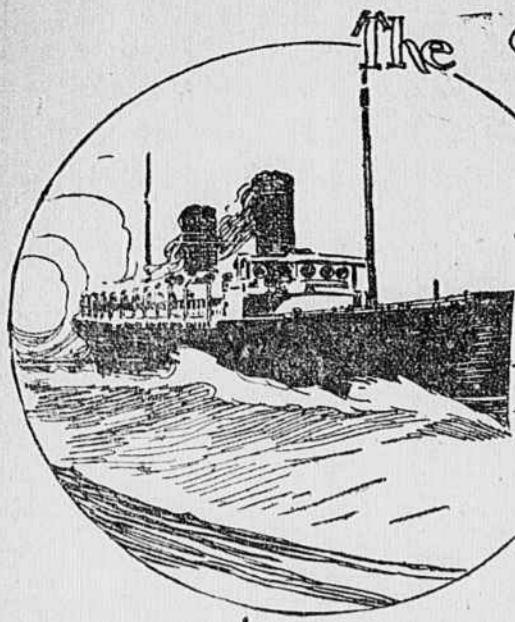


REAL ROMANCES OF THE BUSINESS WORLD

The Girl from the Ribbon Counter



BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

Luck in business? You could not make Mary McCloskey believe so in a thousand years. Probably you never have heard of her, but everybody of any account in all the great dry goods establishments of New York, St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Louisville knows Mary McCloskey—the highest paid buyer in her line in America.

She is as well known in the great mills of Switzerland, Belgium, Ireland and Southern France as she is the great emporiums of Paris and New York. Twice a year she crosses the Atlantic. Tens of thousands of women throughout the country who never heard her name wear the delicate creations of foreign artists introduced into America by this little Irish-American woman.

It is a common belief among men and women, youths and girls, that there is little or no chance for advancement in a great dry goods store; that the girl who goes behind the counter is soon lost in the shuffle and seldom gets higher than head of stock; that the cash girl can only hope to climb sales-counter high; that the boy's limit is a position as floor walker; that promotion goes by favor when there is no machine, in which the human is ground down to nothingness and individuality is lost. They are wrong. The case of Mary McCloskey proves it.

It will be eighteen years next Christmas since Mary McCloskey got a job in a Broadway shop. It was not one of the great establishments—one of those that employ thousands of hands and appeals to every need of man, woman and household. It was rather a high-grade establishment, catering only to the wealthy and offering specialties in women's wear.

Miss McCloskey was not taken on regularly, but was one of the holiday helpers. It is the custom in the dry goods trade to employ around Christmas time a lot of extra girls and let them go again after the rush is over. The new "hand" was sent to the ribbon counter. The fact that she might only be there a few weeks did not lessen her interest in her work. So soon as she was installed she took a mental inventory of the stock in her department. So far as she was concerned her business world began where her companion on the right left off and ended where her companion on the left began. Her stock of ribbons ap-

peared to her to be the great thing that the world needed.

It did not interest her to know what was going on down the aisle or what was being said by her right-hand neighbor or the girl on her left or the one across the way. Her business was ribbons—the sale of ribbons. One of the first things she did was to take her stock of bright-hued bolts and rearrange them. She had a good idea of harmony, especially the harmony of colors.

She was young, petite, well formed and attractive. She liked pretty things and she knew how to make the most of pretty things. Never a woman who walked down the aisle, after that stock had been rearranged, could pass those ribbons without looking at them. There were very few who stopped to examine the ribbons who got away without purchasing from Mary McCloskey. If they needed any ribbon, she was a born saleswoman. One principle essential to salesmanship is to know and believe in your goods. The second essential is to know how to talk to your prospective customer. Miss McCloskey, bright-eyed, earnest, intelligent, made her customers feel that their individual needs were being studied and met. There was no overstatement, no over-enthusiasm; just a gracious, sincere presentation. She gave her whole attention to a patron. Once the customer gave her name and address, that name or address never was forgotten. Neither did the girl ever forget a face.

If there is an aristocracy of trade in New York, that Broadway-house had

the patronage of the aristocracy in its particular line. The aristocracy loves to be known and to be well served. It piques it if it does not actually offend a woman of wealth and fashion. When in a shop, to have to explain who she is to each and every salesgirl she purchases from. She remembers the girl who remembers her and she remembers the girl who truly knows her business.

In a few weeks of that holiday season various fashionable women noted the clever little girl at the ribbon counter. When they passed her post, although they did not need her pretty goods, they bowed a greeting and she smiled her acknowledgment of it.

Apparently it was not only the customers who noticed the girl who sold ribbons; those Christmas days. When the holiday season closed and the time came for the extra hands to be dismissed and even for some of the regular employees to be laid off, one of the proprietors of the establishment remarked that Miss McCloskey was to be retained. The store was not so

big that its proprietors were altogether removed from contact with their employees or knowledge of the workings of the whole machine. As they made their rounds they had an opportunity to observe what was going on. Even the crush of holiday shopping did not blind them to the fact that a girl out of the ordinary was behind their ribbon counter, that she knew how to display what she had for sale, and that the patrons left her with a smile of satisfaction and good feeling. They noted, too, that the sales at the ribbon counter were greater than Christmas than they ever had been in any previous holiday season. So, when all the other extra hands went, Mary McCloskey stayed.

All this time little Miss McCloskey was getting \$3 a week. She was born almost round the corner from the store and she still lives in the house where she was born. She had no carfare to pay, she went home to her luncheon, and \$3 seemed a lot of money. This was her first job and she was perfectly satisfied. She had the distinction of having been retained on the selling force when she had only been taken on as an "extra," and taken all in all, life seemed very fair.

To sell ribbons was a joy. To meet and serve women of wealth and fashion had its own charm and taught her much of qualities and moods. There was satisfaction, delight even, in her work, which made her wonder why other girls complained so much of the monotony of daily toil. There was no monotony to her.

Nine out of ten girls who work in the big stores of various cities find much interest in discussing what So-and-So said or did at last night's party, or on that motor ride. What "she" wore and what "he" said it is very important what "he" said; must be thoroughly discussed and speculated upon before the customer is waited on. Miss McCloskey had plenty of amusement, but saw no reason for talking about it in detail with the other shop girls. She found enough to do attending to her own work. No one ever had to wait while she finished a conversation with some other employee. Possibly one of the bosses took cognizance of this fact along with the steady increase of sales at the ribbon counter, for after the "extra" girl had been there two years her wages were increased to ten a week. It seemed like a small fortune for Miss McCloskey. There did not seem to be much chance after this great leap for her to go higher. She was content. She sold ribbon and increased her acquaintance among the rich and extended her circle of purchasers, steadily building up her business year after year, until she had been behind the ribbon counter eight years. She still was getting ten a week.

Then one day there was a sensation in the store. Details of what "he" said last night and what "she" wore were forgotten. And why shouldn't they be? Who ever heard of a New York merchant doing such an absurd thing as taking a girl from behind the ribbon counter and transforming her into a buyer—not only a buyer, but a foreign buyer? Sending her abroad to France, of all places, to buy goods for the house. And not only that, the girl he had selected to buy neckwear and waists abroad had never even sold a waist or a bit of neckwear in all her life before! What did little Mary McCloskey, born in Seventeenth Street, practically round the corner from the store, still living in Seventeenth Street and never far from New York in her life, know about traveling to Europe as purchaser for a great New York establishment? Assuredly it was absurd; everybody in the store realized that—except the boss.

His buyer of neckwear and waists had been suddenly. This buyer had always purchased his goods in America. It would have seemed had enough if Miss McCloskey had the responsibility of buying as the former buyer had done. But it was the boss's idea to make these purchases abroad. To send Miss McCloskey over there to do the buying of goods she never had handled stupefied everybody from the book-

keepers to the cash girls who sat in judgment on the boss every day, and each and every one of whom knew far better than the boss how the business should be run.

But the boss had been watching. He had kept one eye on the ribbon counter and one on his customers who were served there. He had, in fact, studied men and women for many years. He knew a business woman when he saw one. He considered the ten-a-week young woman in the ribbon department as good a business person as he had seen in a long time. The technicalities of waists and neckwear, he figured, could be acquired. The learning of them was a detail.

Probably the parents of Mary McCloskey did not cross the ocean from Queens-town to New York with any greater perturbation than did Miss McCloskey herself when she sailed away to Europe as buyer for this New York house. It was a new world she entered. A few necessary instructions were given her, but the rest was left for her to find out, guided by her own good judgment. Possibly the boss was a better reader of human nature than he ever had been given credit for. Certain it was that the responsibility of the ribbon counter was nothing to the

responsibility of entering a strange city, visiting strange mills, going to a land where a strange language was spoken and buying goods rich with mean profit or great loss to her employer. She had to go to mills, she had to go to great wholesale and great retail establishments. She had to carry on her conversation in some instances through an interpreter. She didn't know a word of French and she doesn't know much of it now. She had to figure closely on goods upon which profit could be made. She had to sense what would appeal to the most critical women buyers of the Western world. She had to have almost a psychic foreknowledge of coming styles. It was necessary for her to pit her instinct and business sense against the shrewdest minds in the trade. She had to blaze her own way. The house had never had a foreign representative in her line before. She had to stumble and grope. It takes a higher courage for a woman to cross the ocean and travel as she did than for any man to start out and tour America selling goods. And many a man has found this ordeal too much and given up. It has taken lots of them years to find themselves. Miss McCloskey's first trip was not what she considered a perfect success. It was two years before she was satisfied with the work she did. She had much to learn, many pitfalls to avoid which are dug for experienced buyers, and she had to depend on her own common sense and shrewdness to buy wisely and well.

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trip satisfied him, and everything after that only confirmed him in his belief. It is ten years since Mary McCloskey first crossed the seas. Twice a year from that time she had made a trip. Now she is known to Switzerland, to France, to Belgium and to Ireland. There is nothing created by the great artists of fashion, in her particular lines, that she is not among the first to get. The finest products of the looms, the most delicate of needle-work, the daintiest of creations, the newest combinations of color, that charm the eyes and hearts of the women, she searches for as a collector of rare things hunts the highways and byways for his particular treasure. And she finds them. She has become such a figure that the masters of the mills, the great princes of the palaces of trade—even the women of Norway, whose manipulation of their hundreds of little spools and bobbins has raised them to the rank of artists, hold their choicest products for Miss McCloskey's coming.

The girls in the store no longer wonder why the boss selected her to go abroad. The growth of her department has been based upon the things that the keen judgment of this woman buyer has brought to them. It is chiefly through her selection of goods that her house has grown into specializing in these particular lines. Today she buys for six departments. She buys the neckwear, the waists, the handkerchiefs, the robes, the unmade blouses and all the material that goes into the manufacturing work-room, and she has charge of this work-room, which employs girls and women in the busy season.

Going abroad has no further terrors for Mary McCloskey. It is a part of the day's work. She no longer has to hunt round, dreading to make mistakes. Mill men and merchants now look for her expectantly. Her career is chronicled and reported as that of an important personage. Men of high reputation in the trade follow her lead, glad to purchase anything that she approves. The ribbon girl of ten years ago has become a permanent figure in the dry goods world of two continents. When she returns to New York after one of her semi-annual trips she has the pleasant knowledge that thousands of America's best-dressed and wealthiest women are wearing garments and garnitures of her personal selection.

She has no more devoted admirers than the girls in the shop and in the work-rooms. It is an event when her models are displayed. The girls never cease wondering where she finds so many beautiful things or how she has developed her exquisite taste.

Even Miss McCloskey or her employer has a fine economical sense. A madcap model she brings home is taken to the work-room and literally dissected, to find out just what enters into their harmonies of color and fabric. Then begins the work of duplication—the creation of articles so like the originals that only an expert can tell them apart. The delicacy of some of these fabrics is marvelous, and the amount of detail in the making of certain garments almost beyond belief. All of this work comes under the supervision of Mary McCloskey. All of it has to be turned out within a certain time to catch the trade for the house in both wholesale and retail in her particular lines. The representatives of the emporiums of the East, the South, the West, the Middle West, watch for her spring and fall displays as the Parisians look for the displays of the great houses of the Rue de la Paix. She has become the great figure in her branch of trade.

She does not get \$3 a week now. It is nearer \$5,000 a year. But she is the same Mary McCloskey who went behind the ribbon counter eighteen years ago. She has the same fine sense of making the most attractive exhibition of the goods she has to sell, and she pays the same deep, earnest attention to those she serves. Her world has broadened from the world of ribbons to a world of many wondrous fabrics, but she was the same faithful worker when she got the \$3 a week as she is now when she gets nearly three times \$3 a day. She is one living example—the best New York offers—of the fact that there is opportunity even in the big dry goods field for the humblest worker in a great establishment. She has never worked for but the one employer. She has never had to ask for an increase. She has climbed to the topmost rung of the ladder through sheer ability.

It is not the fall display of Miss McCloskey's latest purchases that interests the girls of the shop most, however, just now. They are concentrating their somewhat uneasy attention upon a certain solitary that gleams upon the third finger of her left hand. But it is doubtful, even if their worst suspicions are confirmed, that the business world will lose Mary T. McCloskey, buyer of beautiful things. (Copyright, 1911, by Richard Spillane.)





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